



History of Encyclopædia Britannica and Britannica Online Taking a Great Legacy into the 21st Century

Origins

The *Encyclopædia Britannica* was born in 18th-century Scotland amid the great intellectual ferment known as the Scottish Enlightenment. It was then and there, in Edinburgh, that Adam Smith prepared *The Wealth of Nations*, Sir Walter Scott wrote novels, Robert Burns poetry, David Hume and Adam Ferguson philosophy, and James Boswell grew to manhood and attended the university. According to one chronicler of *Britannica* history, Edinburgh in the mid-1700s was "a city on the verge of a golden age, a center of learning and a home of writers, thinkers, and philosophers, wags, wits, and teachers."

It was against this setting that Colin Macfarquhar, a printer, and Andrew Bell, an engraver, decided to create an encyclopedia that would serve the new era of scholarship and enlightenment. They formed a "Society of Gentlemen" to publish their new reference work and hired the twenty-eight-year-old scholar William Smellie to edit it. It would be arranged alphabetically, "compiled upon a new plan in which the different Sciences and Arts are digested into distinct Treatises or Systems," and its chief virtue was to be, in the editor's word, "utility."

The first edition of the *Britannica* was published one section at a time, in "fascicles," over a three-year period, beginning in 1768. The three-volume set, completed in 1771, quickly sold out. Encouraged this success, the publishers issued the second edition in 10 volumes (1777-84).

The *Encyclopædia Britannica* first came to the United States in the form of a pirated edition printed in Philadelphia in 1790 by Thomas Dobson. Owners of that set included George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Alexander Hamilton.

Contributions from the leading scholars began in 1815-24. Contributors included Sir Walter Scott, Thomas Malthus, David Ricardo, James Mill, and Thomas Young, whose pioneering efforts to penetrate the mystery of the Egyptian hieroglyphics on the Rosetta Stone first saw light of day under the *Britannica* imprint. The ninth edition, published in 1875-89, is often remembered as the "scholar's edition." It embodied as no other publication of the day the transformation of scholarship wrought by scientific discovery and new critical methods.

Twentieth Century

The eleventh edition (1910-11) was produced in cooperation with Cambridge University, and though by then ownership of the *Britannica* had passed to two Americans, Horace Hooper and Walter Jackson, the strength and confidence of much of its writing marked the high point of Edwardian optimism and perhaps of the British Empire itself.



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Continued

The addition of supplemental volumes resulted in the twelfth (1921-22) and thirteenth (1926) editions. Contributors included Sigmund Freud, Albert Einstein, Marie Curie, Leon Trotsky, Harry Houdini, H.L. Mencken, and W.E.B. Du Bois. The article "Mass Production," signed by Henry Ford, is actually believed to have been written by his personal publicist.

In 1929 the principal operations of the company had moved to the United States, and other important changes took place. Whereas previously the editorial staff would be disbanded after the completion of a new edition, the company now maintained a permanent editorial department whose job was to keep pace with the rapid growth of knowledge.

The encyclopedia began to undergo continuous revision when the company's headquarters moved to Chicago in the 1930s, and in 1938 the first edition of the *Britannica Book of the Year* appeared. William Benton, later a U.S. Senator, led the company from 1943 until his death in 1973. During this time the company published the innovative fifteenth edition of the *Britannica* and *Great Books of the Western World*.

By the 1990s Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., had produced or was at work on encyclopedias and other educational materials in Japan, Korea, China, Taiwan, Italy, France, Spain, Latin America, Turkey, Hungary, Poland, and elsewhere.

Britannica was an early leader in electronic publishing and new media. In 1981, under an agreement with Mead Data Central, the first digital version of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* was created for the Lexis-Nexis service. Britannica also created the first multimedia CD-ROM encyclopedia, *Compton's MultiMedia Encyclopedia*, in 1989.

In 1994 the company developed *Britannica Online*, the first encyclopedia for the Internet, which made the entire text of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* available worldwide. That year the first version of the *Britannica* on CD-ROM was also published.

Britannica Today

The boldness of recent publishing initiatives combined with Britannica's long tradition of excellence continue to shape the company's vision for the digital age. The year 1997 saw the creation of the *Britannica Internet Guide*, a directory of the Web's best sites chosen by Britannica editors for their quality and usefulness. The company has continued to develop and expand *Britannica Online*, which now includes a variety of resources, including 123,000 encyclopedia articles. In 2002 Britannica introduced *Britannica Online School Edition*, specially designed for elementary and secondary student use.

Britannica is also expanding its line of printed products. In 2001 and 2003 the company published new and thoroughly revised printings of the 32-volume *Encyclopædia Britannica*, now the oldest continuously published reference work in the English language. In 2003 Britannica also introduced a printed reference set for young children, the 13-volume *My First Britannica*. The media of publication have changed, but Britannica's basic mission has not. It's the same today as it's been since 1768: to be the worldwide leader in reference, education, and learning.